

America's Civil War

Challenges, Perspectives, Opportunities

Let me begin by stating that I am not a military historian, much less a Civil War historian. Thus, I was surprised and honored when the National Park Service's Chief Historian Dwight Pitcaithley asked me to be the guest editor for this thematic issue of CRM on the Civil War. I do, however, work at a historic site that, had the Civil War never occurred, would probably be houses or condos in suburban South St. Louis, MO; knowledge of its 19th-century past all but forgotten. No, it is not a Civil War battlefield, nor a museum containing military artifacts. It is the home of Ulysses S. Grant; preserved to interpret the personal life of the Union's commanding general.

There are many defining moments in our country's past, but few had such an overwhelming and direct impact on all citizens as the Civil War. Today, descendants of soldiers, historians, reenactors and others spend time and money studying and reliving the Civil War era. The occasionally vociferous debates, the efforts to preserve battlefield sites, the growing number of reenactors, the ever-expanding list of publications, and the thousands of visitors to Civil War-related sites attest to the continued impact of the Civil War in our lives today.

Given that the Civil War is probably the most researched and written about topic in American history, one might wonder what could be said that hasn't already been written or said before. Yet the interest in, fascination with, and debate over the Civil War continues. The official beginning of the sesquicentennial of the war is 9 years away, yet an Internet search for sites on the American Civil War turned up nearly 1 million results. Individuals working at Civil War-related sites and trying to remain current in their knowledge cannot possibly keep up with the constant flow of information that is being published. The articles in this thematic issue of CRM only scratch the surface of the breadth of the work being done at local, state, and national levels to commemorate, preserve, interpret, and study the

Civil War. The articles represent a wide variety of disciplines, institutions, and methods for managing Civil War-related sites and understanding the past. The topics presented reflect the challenges, perspectives, and opportunities that are being met and addressed. Challenges can be created when there is a lack of knowledge or when research expands our knowledge to the point where we must revise our views. Changing exhibits, reworking interpretive programs, conducting research, using modern technology, and developing networks are just a few ways the challenges are being met by various agencies and organizations throughout the country.

Challenges

The challenge of presenting Civil War history at historic sites and battlefields is addressed in several articles. In the past, most battlefield sites interpreted the specific battle that took place at that location, with little connection to where the battle fit in the larger story of the war. "Too often," according to former National Park Service Deputy Director Denis Galvin, "stories are told park-by-park. It is Antietam or Gettysburg, not the Civil War."^{*} Dwight Pitcaithley found himself and the National Park Service in the midst of controversy as battlefield parks began expanding their interpretation beyond the story of the particular battle. They recognized the necessity of placing the battle within its larger historical context to educate the public; the majority of whom can no longer identify even the half century in which the war occurred. Pitcaithley's article addresses the controversy and the National Park Service response to charges of "politically correct" and "cookie cutter" interpretation. Telling the same story at each battlefield site is not the intent or goal. To ensure that each park continues to tell the story pertinent to its site, while at the same acknowledging that there is some commonality, among Civil War sites requires collaboration and planning. John Hennessy's article focuses on the work already underway among a wide variety of Civil War-related national parks to achieve this goal and to prepare for the commemoration of

the sesquicentennial of the war. The challenge of bridging the gap between academic historians and “neo-Confederates” is discussed in the article by John Coski of the Museum of the Confederacy. He encourages us in “Historians Under Fire,” to fully participate in a dialogue rather than attacks over whose heritage should predominate.

Perspectives

Several of the articles present new research and perspectives on the Civil War. Archeology has long been a tool for learning about the past at historic sites, but not at battlefields. Using the Mine Creek Battlefield in Kansas as a case study, William Lees argues that battlefield archeology can aid in management decisions, improve interpretation, and increase visitor understanding. Bob Higgins shares his work on how geology influenced not only where battles occurred, but also how the knowledge of an area’s geology shaped some commanders’ decisions.

In recent years, numerous books and articles have explored the role of women and African Americans in the Civil War. Similarly, battlefield and non-battlefield sites began to reexamine their records and are now including stories of those previously excluded from their interpretation. Based on research conducted under cooperative partnerships, Susan Hawkins sheds new light on the role of African Americans during the campaign for Fort Donelson. “‘We Have a Claim on This Estate’ — Remembering Slavery at Arlington House,” documents visitor responses to an exhibit on slavery at the antebellum home of Robert E. Lee. Karen Byrne’s article discusses the challenges of presenting a more inclusive history at Lee’s home, while emphasizing the need to expose visitors to different perspectives. The research by Cornelia Sexauer demonstrates the wide range of materials available on the role of women during the Civil War. Libraries, museums, historic sites, and battlefields usually find that the problem is not whether they have any information on women or minorities, but how to synthesize the wealth of information to provide a more complete story of the past. Ella Rayburn shows how sites that appear to have little connection to the Civil War can inform the public. The importance of railroads during the war was presented through an exhibit at Steamtown National Historic Site in Pennsylvania.

Opportunities

Challenges and perspectives abound in Civil War history, and many of the articles reflect how

sites have turned them into opportunities.

Gettysburg National Military Park is using primary source documents to restore the battlefield to its 1863 appearance. Katie Lawhon, in her article, “Gettysburg the Way the Soldiers Saw It in 1863” explains the long range plan for the restoration, including moving the museum to allow for rehabilitation of the Union battle line at Cemetery Ridge. Ft. Sumter recently opened a new Visitor Education Center that connects to other cultural activities in Charleston, SC. Carlin Timmons and Sandy Pusey discuss the careful research and planning that went into the new exhibits on the colonial period and the causes of the war. The only Civil War battle site administered by the South Carolina State Park Service is located in Rivers Bridge. Dan Bell and Bryan Enter write about this underinterpreted site and the educational programs being developed. Mark Christ’s article on the Arkansas Civil War Heritage Trail discusses the opportunities available to sites through the American Battlefield Protection Program. Finally, an article by Karen Miller and me discusses the challenges and opportunities presented at Ulysses S. Grant National Historic Site as we develop exhibits for recently restored structures.

What ties the articles together, besides the Civil War theme, is the importance of partnerships, community support, and public participation in the process of preservation, interpretation, and education. While this is true for many aspects of cultural resource management, the emotional issues that the Civil War evoke for people today emphasize the need for interaction and inclusiveness. That the authors and the sites they represent include local, regional, national, private, government, and educational institutions demonstrates the encompassing role the Civil War still plays in our history and memory today. It is a pleasure to bring together these articles representing a wide variety of disciplines, institutions, and methods for managing Civil War-related sites. My thanks to each of the contributors for sharing their knowledge and expertise.

Note

- * Denis P. Galvin, “Connecting the Dots: Parks, Preservation, and Heritage in the 21st Century,” *CRM* 24:7 (2001): 5.

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